

Chapter 1371 Generalist Mech Designer

The Sentinel Kingdom beckoned to Ves. After getting out of the mud pool that was the Chuko Republic, he expected to make a much bigger harvest in the strong and powerful third-rate state.

Ves and his staff already made a number of orders and reservations at Sentinel. He also had a number of goals in mind while he traveled from system to system conducting various exchanges with local mech designers.

From overhauling the Barracuda at a waiting drydock, illicitly obtaining the key materials required to build an ultracompact battery, accessing a lab to study the properties of P-stone, buying a remarkable pet for Ketis, finding a source of geril spice, investigating the circumstances of his father in the nearby Nyxian Gap, begging his girlfriend to procure a batch of pure ASMAS and harvesting a spiritual fragment related to tigers, Ves had a lot on his plate!

"I also have to design the Devil Tiger!"

The scope of his design project grew to an unimaginable degree. From his original intention to design an affordable, disposable experimental mech to creating a legendary machine from scratch, Ves had needlessly made things difficult for himself!

However, the reason why he broke his own rules and let his imagination run wild was because he became extremely passionate about the project!

"Sometimes, pursuing my passion is more important than sticking to practicality!"

If his goal was to earn money by designing a commercially-viable mech, then Ves would definitely have second thoughts.

"But that's not the case right now."

His primary goal was to complete the Upgrade Missions from the System. Once he accomplished this, his Metallurgy and Mechanics Skills would finally reach a level that would enable him to design mechs that could potentially capture a significant amount of market share.

"The gap in performance between my models and the mainstream mech models will further decrease!"

Nonetheless, Ves never aimed to compete over specs. Who cared if a competing mech performed ten percent better than his own. The unique selling proposition of his mechs could not be replicated by anyone!

"No one can design an LMC mech that out-LMC's the LMC!"

Perhaps a number of weird Class IX mech designers existed somewhere in the galaxy that could manipulate human emotions as well. Yet Ves strongly believed that even then, those who worked directly with spirituality must number extremely few.

The belief that he was pioneering an entirely new dimension in mech design always sustained his pride! His entire career was based around developing something new and unprecedented!

"And my upcoming Devil Tiger design will exemplify the innovations that I'll introduce to the market!"

Of course, as an illicit mech design based on pirated licenses, Ves did not want the Devil Tiger to be associated with his public identity. He'd have to modify the X-Factor of his mech in a way that largely focused its influence inward. He also had to obscure some of the mechanics related to his specialization.

Perhaps in time a very clever and inquisitive mech designer might be able to uncover Ves' fingerprints in the Devil Tiger's design.

Ves didn't particularly mind this possibility. He just had to obscure enough evidence to make it difficult for him to be directly tied to the mech and its design. As long as he maintained enough plausible deniability, nothing would come out of it. At most, he could simply say that someone stole a prototype of a confidential design project.

"It wouldn't be the first time someone stole a prototype." He muttered.

Time passed. As his fleet quietly exited the Chuko Republic, Ves and everyone breathed a sigh in relief.

Ves had not envisioned his visit to the Chuko Republic to be so problematic. To be fair, he pretty much asked for it by traveling to such a troubled state in the first place.

Despite cutting his visit to Chuko short, Ves was already satisfied with the gains he made. Not only could he look forward to wearing a second shield generator once he replaced its spent battery, he also gained the insights he needed to elevate his design project to a higher level.

The Devil Tiger continued to consume his attention in the following days and weeks. It was unlike anything he had ever tackled before. Working with newfangled ASMAS tech that played a key role in enabling the Devil Tiger's many functions forced him to hit the books.

He swamped himself in academic literature. With his Intelligence, his reading and comprehension speed allowed him to devour book after book and paper after paper. His view on smart metal technology and ASMAS technology grew by leaps and bounds in a very short amount of time!

"All of this is necessary if I want to reduce costs and increase efficiency! Pure ASMAS are simply too expensive for me to waste!"

Ves particularly focused on the properties of substitute ASMAS. He read up on a lot of material-specific papers to see what kind of materials and exotics functioned as the best building blocks of substitute ASMAS.

"Substitute ASMAS is meant to be the disposable kind of smart metal." He summed up. "If I want to make the Devil Tiger last as long as possible, then I have to enable it to replenish its substitute ASMAS from all the exotics that are prevalent in the Nyxian Gap!"

Longevity, sustainability and ease of supply dominated his concerns about his design project. He did not expect the owners of the Devil Tiger to march up to a populated trade system and order a batch of rare exotics imported from another star cluster to make up for any material shortfalls.

"Whoever possesses the Devil Tiger has to be able to scrape up minerals from a planet or asteroid and dump it near the mech so that it can perform its own repairs!"

Despite the many difficulties he faced, Ves nonetheless enjoyed the novelty of designing something different. He was working with an entirely different mold of mech design. Both the smart metal and bestial mech aspects of his design project forced him to revise many of his assumptions and move out of his comfort zone.

Exploring different avenues and keeping things fresh and interesting helped him a lot.

Some mech designers believed that they achieved the best progress by narrowing the scope of their work. By focusing on a few mech types or mech concepts, they could refine their proficiency in designing these kinds of mechs to a level beyond a generalist.

"Ketis is likely pursuing this path." He rubbed his chin. "However, this approach is not for everyone."

Ves differentiated mech designers between those who sought to broaden their capabilities and those who narrowed them down to a laser focus.

"There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches."

A mech designer who wanted to narrow themselves down to a smaller variety of mechs could design fantastic mechs that fell within their area of interest. Every mech designer with Class VI and Class VII design philosophies fell under this category.

However, the biggest shortcoming of these mech designers was that they couldn't really design a mech that fell outside of their specialty.

Oh, they probably possessed enough of a foundation to do a decent job at it, but a mediocre mech design didn't cut it in a competitive market environment.

"It would be like asking Ketis to design a rifleman mech! I know for sure it will end in tears for everyone involved!"

On the other hand, a mech designer like Ves who was insatiably curious very much enjoyed exploring new mechs. With regards to mech design, he did not fear the unknown. Instead, he embraced it! If he didn't have the courage to tackle something new, then he wouldn't have the guts to design a hybrid mech, a super-medium mech, a hero mech and now a bestial mech!

All of the aforementioned mech types gave lots of mech designers headaches! Ves too sometimes wished he worked on something easier, but he persisted because he always made a lot of gains after he completed a difficult design project.

There was no right or wrong answer with regards to which approach worked better.

"It's just like the debate about specialization versus generalization in mech types. The best option depends on the circumstances."

In his perspective, someone like Ketis would probably do fine if she became a generalist. However, she would probably do so much better if she pursued her interest in swordsman mechs and specialized in them. Her experiences, knowledge and passion all laid down a very favorable foundation for her to go far if she went down this road.

As for Ves, his design philosophy did not favor any specific mech type over another. Even though he mostly designed expensive mechs up till now, that did not rule out designing cheaper mechs in the future.

For him, specializing in a narrow range of mech types made little sense. The gains he could make from specialization would not yield more results than those who truly dedicated themselves to their narrow range of interests.

A generalist approach suited him much better as his competitive advantage was very broad and not limited to a handful of specific mech types.

He always knew he was inclined towards this direction, but now that the System pushed him to explore outside his comfort zone did he gain a new understanding about this approach.

"Even among generalists, there are differences!"

Some mech designers merely branched out because they wanted to form a complete mech catalog that covered all the conventional mech archetypes. They wanted their mech companies to be the one-stop solution for all the products a mech buyer could ask.

For a long time, Ves held this stance. His intention was to slowly increase his repertoire until he covered all the necessary mech archetypes. Once he completed his mech catalog, he no longer intended to explore something new.

"This is fine for most mech designers, but is it really the best direction to take for me?" He asked himself.

The System obviously didn't want him to grow comfortable anytime soon. Ves understood the logic of it all. By constantly tackling strange new design projects, he trained his mind in becoming more creative in solving problems.

If he just expanded his repertoire up to a certain point and no longer explored new methods and techniques, he risked becoming more complacent. His problem solving skills would solidify until he only became capable of solving problems that fell within his comfort zone.

"On the other hand, if I keep exploring something new, then I'll be so much more capable when I reach the point where progressing my design philosophy becomes difficult!"

This was the overall lesson he learned from Seniors who tried but failed to innovate their way to Master. A vast gulf existed between the two ranks, and only the most hard-working, creative and ingenious mech designers stood a chance of bridging this immense gap!

His passion for his Devil Tiger design project already indicated that he was heading in the right direction. If he didn't enjoy the process of learning something new and expanding his horizons, then he wasn't suitable to climb higher up the ranks.

"I can't cheat my way into becoming more competent!"

He called up his unfinished design and studied the progress he made. With increased understanding, he became a lot more clever with how he intended to utilize ASMAS in his Devil Tiger.

Though Ves did not create a specific image to guide his design process, his passion and his singular focus was sufficient to empower it with a preliminary degree of X-Factor!

Nonetheless, obtaining a spiritual fragment and forming it into a suitable design spirit for his Devil Tiger became a higher and higher priority for the

design project. His mech would never reach its full potential without including this crucial element!

"Fortunately, I've got just the place where I can obtain something suitable!"

Within the Sentinel Kingdom, there existed a peculiar tourist planet. Its entire surface had been terraformed into a terrestrial paradise.

Along with seeding it with many ordinary Terran and alien species, the state also seeded it with a large variety of cats, tigers, lions, leopards, panthers, and other cat-like species!

The government even dumped various exobeasts that resembled cats in this wild and savage environment!

"Our next destination is Felixia, the Planet of Cats! Lucky will love it there!"

Chapter 1372 Cashing In

Ves held another 'virtual date' with Gloriana. This time, they visited a live projection of a ballet show that took place somewhere in the Hexadric Hegemony.

The two sat in a private gallery that overlooked the dancers down the stage who performed their intricate dance.

To spice the performance up, the performers danced across a transparent maze-like stage where gravity changed directions at different spots. Pockets of weightlessness allowed the dancers to spin perpetually and perform all kinds of visually-impressive feats.

Both Ves and Gloriana dressed up for the black tie occasion. Ves wore a black tuxedo enriched with sophisticated golden details on its lapels.

To be honest, Ves didn't pick his own outfit. His fashion sense was nonexistent, so he allowed Gavin to program his smart clothing in a stylish but safe configuration.

As for Gloriana, Ves found it difficult to ignore her gorgeous appearance.

She opted for a shimmering green dress that complimented her slender contours and reflected lights like stars over a green horizon. The dress left her arms and neck bare. Only her comm and a pair of exotic arm bracelets graced her arms.

She also carried her hair in a curly bun that fell like sickles across the back of her neck. Along with her shiny earrings and her sharp facial features, Ves could hardly draw his eyes away from her alluring face!

Obviously, his 'girlfriend' knew what kind of effect she had on Ves. She frequently raised the back of her hand in order to stifle her excited giggles.

While Ves and Gloriana sat together, their cats also tentatively interacted with each other.

"Meow!"

"Miaow!"

"Meow?"

"Miaow miaow."

Gloriana playfully placed a cute pink bowtie on top of Clixie's head, causing the Rubarthan Sentinel Cat to look extra cute.

Ves couldn't allow Lucky to fall behind, so he temporarily replaced his gem cat's miniaturized stealth generator with a black-and-white bowtie.

As the two cats admired each other's accessories, Ves and Gloriana engaged each other in light conversation.

"You're a lot more comfortable in your own skin than before, Ves. I like you better this way."

Ves smiled. "I recently commenced with a very difficult but very ambitious mech project."

"Oh? Do tell."

"I can't. The project I'm working on is not exactly proper. I'll get in a lot of trouble if it's exposed."

She pouted. "Don't you trust me?"

Despite her pleas, Ves held his ground. "I'm sorry, but what I'm working on really can't be exposed. It's not safe for me to divulge the details over a comm connection."

His coy attempts at keeping the details of his project to himself only aroused her interest. Ves inwardly smiled at the growing curiosity that formed behind Gloriana's sparkling eyes.

"Will you tell me about your design when we next meet up again in reality?"

"Sure. As long as we can talk securely, I don't mind showing off my work. It's just.. I don't know if I can present you with anything meaningful."

"Why so, Ves?"

"The challenges I'm facing are very considerable. What I'm trying to design is so radical and ambitious that I'll definitely achieve an evolution in my design style if I succeed! Such gains don't come easy! There's a chance that I'll get stuck at some point!"

"I know what that is like." Gloriana said with concern as her projection leaned into Ves. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Ves tried his best to suppress his sly smile. He'd been aiming for these words from the start.

While a part of him found it shameful to approach Gloriana for a handout, Ves still went through with this course of action. Since Gloriana pulled off all kinds of stunts already, then he at least deserved to take advantage as well!

As for shame? The damage to his pride was nothing compared to bringing his design project to fruition! As long as he successfully designed his Devil Tiger, then all of the suffering would have been worth the sacrifices!

"To be honest, I'm in a bit of a fix." He said carefully. "The mech I'm designing can't be realized without including an essential system. Unfortunately, my financial means and supply channels are not sufficient for me to get what I want."

Gloriana frowned. "You've always been fairly sober in your previous works. Is your design that complicated this time?"

"It's exactly because of these new additions that makes it so remarkable. If I still maintained relations with Master Olson or Leemar's Clifford Society, I could have exchanged some favors and merits to obtain what I need to complete my design project."

What Ves did not mention was that Gloriana was responsible for spoiling his ties to the Friday Coalition. She knew it. He knew it. What was done was done. There was no point for him to torch her over her very deliberate act to cut him off from the Friday Coalition.

His implicit message by reminding her of her 'crime' was that she ought to compensate him for the damages!

Since Ves couldn't approach his former Master or his former club for his second-class goodies, then Gloriana ought to provide him what he wanted instead!

Her perfectly face scrunched a bit as she fell into thought. "What is it exactly that you are trying to acquire? It's hard for me to understand your difficulties

when you are withholding so much from me. It's so annoying how often you jam your stateroom, you know!"

Ves patted the top of her head, though his hand went right through her projection. "A man needs his privacy. Be happy my ship can't function well if I jam the entire vessel. As for what I need.. it's a little pricey. Are you familiar with ASMAS?"

"Adaptive smart metal armor system? I'm familiar with it. ASMAS doesn't have a good reputation in the Hegemony. Its fans constantly make a lot of promises but never manage to deliver upon them. If you're actually thinking of working with ASMAS, I really suggest you don't. It has too many flaws!"

"I know what I'm doing, Gloriana. I'm well aware of the merits and limitations of ASMAS. If you want to criticize my work, just wait until I complete it and show you the details. For now, I truly need at least a starter batch of ASMAS."

What he just asked for was quite expensive. Gloriana fell silent for a moment, leaving Ves guessing at what she was thinking.

"Okay." She eventually spoke up. "I can supply you with a batch. It won't be the best quality, but getting my hands on enough ASMAS to sustain a single mech is still doable. I can even have it shipped to your next destination. It's just..."

"What is it, Gloriana?"

She briefly smiled as he mentioned her name. She always liked it when Ves did that.

"I'll have to go through some trouble, you know. Don't you think you ought to repay me, Ves?"

He already expected to pay an additional price for this huge favor. Ves did not delude himself into thinking he could treat his girlfriend as a vending machine without inserting some tokens!

"What can I do to make it easier for you? Mind you, don't expect too much from me. I'm still preoccupied with progressing my design philosophy."

"Hehe. It's nothing too big." She grinned. "I was thinking we should meet up again! I'm still preoccupied with a couple of projects at the moment, but once I'm done I don't have anything that demands my attention in my agenda! Isn't this a lovely time for us to reunite in person? We've already spent so much time together in our virtual meetups that it should be fine for us to meet physically again, right?"

Just as Ves wanted to get something out of Gloriana, his girlfriend also wanted something out of him! The reason why he pushed her suggestion off previously was because he recognized its value to her. As long as he kept dangling the possibility of agreeing to another meeting beyond her reach, he could effectively use it as a bargaining tool!

At this moment, Ves recognized that the time had come to cash in his chips!

"I suppose.. I'm up for meeting up again." He answered reluctantly, though a part of him really looked forward to their next reunion! "I hope we can get to know each other at a gentle pace. I know you're excited and all, but we really do have to take our relationship step by step."

She briefly frowned for a moment, but wiped away the displeasure from her face. "Great! That's a promise then!"

"Don't forget about the ASMAS! If I don't get it, I'll probably be too preoccupied with my design project!"

"I'll obtain some as fast as possible! Don't worry, Ves! This little issue is not a big deal for me. I'm much more excited about our upcoming physical date! Hihi!"

They began to discuss when and where they could possibly meet. After comparing their agendas, they determined that it would be best for them to meet when Ves stopped by the Hertog Dominion or the Tomaris Federation.

"Let's meet at the Tomaris Federation!" She lovingly declared. "While it's a bit distant from the Hegemony, I still need the extra time to arrange all of my affairs if I want to spend the next few years with you! I can't let any lingering issues ruin our perfect time together, hihihi!"

"Whoa! What are you talking about?"

She offered him a brilliant grin. "Since we're meeting up in the future, we might as well stick around, right? Let's spend some time together! I'll go anywhere you go! I won't be a bother!"

"Ehhh.. uhm..."

"We can also design our first collaborative mech together! I'll let you take the lead this time! My specialty is great for designing the perfect mech for a mech pilot! Aren't there some you care about? This would be the perfect time for us to see whether our design philosophies work well with each other!"

Ah. This must be one of the biggest reasons why she wanted to spend an extended amount of time together.

Just as Gloriana obsessed over what their collaboration might yield, so did Ves, though not in such a single-minded way.

For this reason, Ves did not object to this proposal. He wanted to see for himself if their design philosophies really synergized with each other as both of them suspected.

If the promised compatibility and synergy did not take place, then... Gloriana would probably dump him really quickly.

Was this really such a bad outcome? Not necessarily. Either outcome favored him in different ways. He did not lose out no matter what results they achieved once they completed their collaborative project!

"I'm more than willing to design a mech together." He eventually answered.

"Yay! I'm so happy!" Gloriana exuberantly clapped her hands together. "Do you have a mech in mind already? It will help me a lot if you can tell me about the mech pilot you have in mind. I only design custom mechs, so it's really important for me to learn all there is about my customers."

Ves briefly contemplated who deserved to pilot a custom mech. He already formed a small list of people he wanted to bestow with a fantastic mech.

To him, family came first, but his protection was a priority as well! For this reason, he quickly turned his attention to the Avatars of Myth.

"I'd like our first collaborative project to benefit Melkor Larkinson, one of the cousins in my family. He's been leading my personal mech force for years, but he lacks an awe-inspiring mech that befits his rank."

"Okay." Gloriana nodded. "What is your cousin's specialty?"

"Marksmanship. He pilots a landbound rifleman mech."

"Rifleman mech, huh? I've got plenty of experience with those! I'll make the preparations right away!"

"Make sure you study my Crystal Lord mech as well. Melkor has been piloting one for years. Depending on his desires, we might end up designing an upgraded variant of my only rifleman mech design."

"Mmmm. Got it. I already studied it extensively so I know what it prioritizes. I'll be sure to do some research!"

Ves and Gloriana both became more enthused about their upcoming collaborative mech project. They continued to discuss the preliminary details with each other without any reserve.

Chapter 1373 Cat Crazy

Felixia. The Planet of Cats. The Cat Utopia. Originally, it started off as a barren rock in a star system completely devoid of valuable exotic materials.

As the Sentinel Kingdom started settling strategic or mineral-rich star systems, a number of eccentric aristocrats with way too much money than sense had another idea.

Why not terraform a planet into the perfect cat paradise?

When Ves first read about it, he thought these cat-crazed nobles were absolutely mad! What kind of value could a planet dedicated to cats bring to society?

Quite a lot, it seems.

"Cats are the most popular animals in human space. No matter what kind of cute and cuddly little exobeasts get discovered in the galaxy, cats are some of the oldest companions of our race. Isn't that right, Lucky?"

"Meow."

Lucky currently rested on his lap. The cat's bone-white surface crossed with cyan blue glowing lines felt warm to his touch.

"Are you looking forward to Felixia?"

"Meow!"

"I thought you'd be excited. There are lots of fellow cats for you to play with! There's big cats, small cats, alien cats, genetically-engineered cats and even other mechanical cats!"

"Meow meow!"

Ves chuckled. Evidently, Lucky disliked being compared to common cats!

Regardless of what Ves thought of Felixia, the initial colonists somehow turned it into an attractive paradise. It became so famed that it attracted lots of tourists from outside the Sentinel Kingdom!

The initial colonists turned much of the surface of the planet into a managed nature preserve. Different continents and subcontinents featured different attractions.

For example, one region had been turned into a giant petting zoo. Friendly house cats and comparable cat-like species casually roamed the forests, the canyons, the idyllic village settlements and other environments.

Families and crazy cat ladies alike swarmed to this region in great numbers!

Other regions offered other services and attractions. For example, hunting became a very big attraction. Wealthy or daring tourists could bring their own weapons or rent them from the local facilities and go on a hunt in various challenging environments.

The hunters could choose to hunt various mundane and exotic cat-like species, each of them interspersed in carefully-constrained boundaries in order to keep the challenge and risk level predictable.

For example, families bringing their kids to an outing could go on a guided hunt where they hunted down ferocious-looking but inwardly-tame big cats. The kids would come away from the trip with an awesome preserved lion head that they could show off to their friends.

More serious hunters and trained soldiers looking for a challenge could enter the riskier preserves. The big cats there had teeth and even killed some people from time to time!

Anyone entering these dangerous hunting zones did so at their risk, but that was part of the experience.

Aside from hunting mundane big cats, the hunters mainly aimed to take down more exotic cats. Felixia constantly seeded their hunting zones with new, recently-discovered cat-like exobeasts.

They also engaged in a liberal amount of genetic modification, cooking up hybrid cat-alien monstrosities with genes from dozens of different Terran and alien cat species!

All of the cats, whether they were human or alien, natural or artificial, looked good. Hunting down any of these species granted the hunters the right to do with them as they wish. For a fee, they could turn the heads of a big cat into a trophy, turn their hide into a fur coat and much, much more.

Anyone who returned from a hunt at Felixia with a coat made from the fur of their cat prey received the envy of their peers!

Hunting became such a profitable attraction on Felixia that it transformed an entire continent into something even better!

Rather than hunting an exotic big cat on foot, why not hunt them instead with mechs?

Such an operation reminded him of the training camp at Nova Migolatus I. The Vesians there turned an entire forested continent into a dangerous training environment by propagating it with huge exobeasts that posed an actual threat to mechs!

The same had been applied to Felixia's famous mech hunting zones! Instead of seeding them with human-scale cats, the authorities instead designed or obtained formidable mech-sized cats with enhanced strength and other tricks!

"These cats are huge!" Ves admired as he projected some of the footage of some of the impressive creatures. "Some have even survived for decades without succumbing!"

Some cats were too strong, cunning, clever or elusive to take down. With mech hunting teams subjected to various restrictions, it became a real challenge for these teams to take down the more formidable huge cats!

"Tons of mechs get wrecked and numerous mech pilots can even get killed when a huge claw pierces their cockpits!"

Again, while the danger scared away many mech pilots, a small proportion of daredevils and hunting fanatics remained who eagerly chased after these opportunities!

Ves remembered that then-Lieutenant Dise used to be a hunting enthusiast herself. Before she succeeded as the leader of the Swordmaidens, she became famed for hunting down many dangerous exobeasts in the many untamed planets of the frontier!

"Hunting is a big industry!"

The activity attracted a disproportionate amount of wealthy customers to Felixia, enriching it even further! The local authorities used that money to invest in research institutions dedicated to studying and modifying the genes of all of the cat species on the planet!

The scope of Felixia's cat craze frightened Ves quite a bit at first. Not only did tourists come to Felixia to hug cats or hunt them down, some also came to take advantage of the popular gene mod templates developed on the planet!

Though genetic modification as a whole was frowned upon, some fetishes simply couldn't be repressed. The amount of people who visited one of Felixia's renowned genetic clinics boggled the mind.

All of these people wanted to modify their own bodies so that they had cat ears and cat tails! Some even opted for more extreme modifications, such as turning their entire heads into cat heads!

Evidently, genetic modification as a whole was still frowned upon except when it came to cat girls and cat boys! Anyone who showed up with lovely cat ears at the top of their heads could expect to receive a lot of squealing and headpats!

Ves looked down at Lucky. "Do you think Gloriana will appreciate it if I show up to her with cat ears?"

"Meow!!!"

"Hahaha, don't worry, Lucky. I was just joking! You're still the only cat in my household."

Cat ears were too impractical for him anyway. He envisioned that he would have a lot of problems with his gear.

Trying to fit a standard human helmet onto his head while he had cat ears would be very difficult!

If he decided for some insane reason to go through such a needless transformation, then he'd likely be denied due to his already highly modified genes.

"I'm pretty far away from a baseline human." He muttered. "There's too much risk of negative side effects if I add cat ear genes to my already-crowded genome."

He discarded this option in quick order. If Ves wanted to indulge in his cat fancy, he could readily cuddle with Lucky. There was no need to turn himself into a partial cat!

"Meow."

"I agree. Furrries are missing the point. Humans should stay human! There are enough cats in the galaxy!"

Overall, all of these cat-oriented services turned Felixia into a cat lover's paradise. The planet became so known in the region that it had been dubbed the unofficial cat capital of the star sector!

Among the many cute and attractive cats that populated the planet, Ves dismissed all but the largest ones.

His Devil Tiger required a powerful design spirit! To do that, Ves had to obtain a spiritual fragment derived from a powerful felinid exobeast.

The stronger the spiritual fragment, the stronger the resulting design spirit.

The stronger the design spirit, the more remarkable his Devil Tiger design!

He focused on the biggest, deadliest and most persistent huge cats. Ves hungered to harvest a spiritual fragment if possible!

As Ves browsed through footage of some of these specimens, he wondered whether some of them possessed a significant degree of spirituality.

Developing special powers might be the reason why they eluded so many mech hunting teams.

"It's worth a try to see if they have what I need. The only problem is that I need to get in range in order for me to inspect their spiritual qualities."

The most cunning, deadly and unpredictable huge cats acquired so much renown in the mech hunting community that they fell into a separate category.

The Crown Cats!

The mech hunting community considered any huge cat that fell under this prestigious category as a veritable king or queen of their own species, hence the crown!

The Crown Cats officially listed the top twenty most challenging cats to hunt! Despite being hunted non-stop by various mech hunting teams, they always managed to elude or turn the tables against their pursuers!

Ves petted Lucky's back as he flitted through the top twenty. "Those Crown Cats are amazing! They all look great as well!"

Most of the Crown Cats consisted of hybrid alien monstrosities that had been cooked up as experiments in the research institutions of Felixia.

Most genetic experiments turned out to be disappointments. They either suffered from severe genetic defects or didn't turn out to be remarkable enough to justify their cost.

However, a small proportion of experiments resulted in a fantastic exception that outperformed almost every comparable huge cat!

The huge artificial exobeasts that became Crown Cats possessed valuable genetics that the research institutions sold to other interested parties. This alone signified the great value of these aberrant creatures!

Ves frowned. "However, each Crown Cat is essentially one-of-a-kind on Felixia. The authorities only make one unique specimen of each species available for hunting."

This made hunting them all the more valuable and exclusive. Even if some corporation bought the rights to the genes of a Crown Cat, the creatures they grew simply did not hold the same value as a Crown Cat who fought and resisted a mech hunting team under strict conditions!

Felixia deliberately pursued a strategy of maintaining artificial scarcity while hyping up the uniqueness of their remarkable Crown Cats. Only the wild ones who have killed or eluded dozens of mech hunting teams were genuine apex predators! Those grown in a lab environment and killed under heavily skewed circumstances simply didn't give the killers any prestige.

"The hunt must be respected! Only in Felixia do they count!"

One of the biggest reasons why the hunting community respected the hunts on Felixia was their reputation for fairness. No one, not even a wealthy Hexer who offered an enormous bribe to Felixia, could circumvent their rules for their hunts!

While some parties did manage to bribe the authorities in the past, the disgraceful hunts would always be exposed by savvy hunters who were very zealous about the integrity of the hunting challenges.

Those who got exposed not only lost all of the prestige of hunting down a Crown Cat, but their reputation tanked as well as every hunter hated their guts!

A proper hunt had to be a test of skill and intuition. Bringing an overwhelming number of expensive and heavily-armed mechs defeated the purpose of the hunt!

"Hunters can't bring too many mechs." He muttered.

Mech hunting teams could only consist of a single full mech squad at most, along with a limited number of transport or auxiliary vehicles!

The planet also imposed restrictions on the mechs that could be brought to the hunt. No aerial mechs and no heavy mechs were allowed to participate in the hunt, and ranged mechs couldn't bring too much firepower.

The quality of the mechs also couldn't be too excessive.

"With all of these handicaps, it's no wonder the Crown Cats foiled so many hunts."

His face scrunched into a frown as he considered this problem. Certainly, if he could make a deal with the authorities to send an entire mech company into a

hunting zone, he wouldn't have any problem with accessing one of these majestic creatures.

Yet because the hunts were bound by so many rules, Ves could very well die if he accompanied a hunting team!

"This is really dangerous!"

Nonetheless, the danger only added to the allure of hunting down the impressive cats!

"Well, what do you say, Lucky? Are you up for hunting down one of your up-sized cousins?"

"Meow!"

"Hahahaha!"

The more he read about Felixia, the more Ves became attracted to the planet. Perhaps he was a bit of a cat lover after all! Cuddly cats, big cats and huge cats all livened up the tourist planet, turning it into a one-of-a-kind destination that he simply had to visit!

Chapter 1374 Smelly Cats

"You know, there are an endless variety of cats for sale at Felixia." Ves teasingly remarked to Lucky.

"Meow?"

"Some of them are pretty good. There are even geneticists for hire who can customize a brand new kitty to my tastes. Doesn't that sound great?"

"Meow! Meow!"

"Hahaha, why are you so jealous? You won't be alone anymore!"

His cat hissed at him. Lucky really didn't like the competition! He was all the cat that Ves could ask for! No cat could ever surpass a gem cat!

Ves paid Lucky's irritation no mind. Felixia offered a lot of attractions to both cat lovers and cats alike. He was sure that his pet would quickly change his tune once they arrived on the surface.

"There are twenty exceptional Crown Cats and numerous other cats that are almost as great. Surely one of them ought to have what I need!"

To be honest, Ves did not expect exobeasts to possess a great amount of spirituality. From his current level of understanding, only sentient species generated significant amounts of spiritual energy.

"Are the Crown Cats sentient?"

He looked up their descriptions. The mech hunting community collected a lot of intelligence on the beasts, and a number of them certainly acted smart enough to make people suspicious that they were self-aware.

Other Crown Cats exhibited much more primal and instinctive behavior patterns. Instead of outwitting mech hunting teams through clever positioning and devious ambushes, they wrecked the hunting mechs through overwhelming force and ferocious assaults!

Ves couldn't tell from the footage whether any of the sentient or non-sentient Crown Cats possessed a usable degree of spirituality.

He risked wasting lots of time he futilely tried to hunt a spiritually-active cat when none actually existed!

None of the cases alluded to anything that came close to matching the god species of Aeon Corona VII. Both the Sacred Gods and the Wild Gods of that heavy gravity planet mainly acquired their powers from exceptional conditions.

Both types of spiritually-powerful exobeasts benefited from extremely radical genetic modifications from researchers secretly aligned to the Compact.

The higher-dimensional particles leaking from the Starlight Megalodon's FTL drives also provided the essential building blocks that made the god species so exceptional on the spiritual front.

Felixia lacked these conditions! At the very least, Ves could definitely rule out the latter!

As for the former...

A sudden realization came to mind!

"Now that I think about it, Felixia sure engages in a lot of genetic modification."

One of the main areas of interest to the Five Scrolls Compact was their penchant for anything related to biology and living entities. Their understanding of selective breeding, genetic modification, exobeast studies, human augmentation and more was at the forefront in the entire galaxy!

Not even the MTA and CFA could surpass the Compact in these fields!

Knowing that the Compact heavily emphasized genetic modification and knowing that the cultists set up various puppet organizations throughout the star sector did not bode well to Ves.

If Ves applied basic logic to the situation, then chances were high that the Five Scrolls Compact maintained a secret presence on Felixia!

An even worse possibility came to mind. Agents of the Compact may have been involved in the founding of Felixia from the start!

"Goddammit!"

If Felixia really turned out to be a secret playground for the Five Scrolls Compact, then Ves would be jumping straight into the belly of the beast!

However... even if the Five Scrolls Compact maintained a presence on the tourist planet, what were the odds that they discovered something fishy about him? As long as he blended in with the tourists, there shouldn't be much risk of discovery!

"I'll have to watch my conduct." He murmured while he tickled Lucky's ears. "I better get used to eating lots of spicy Nyx dogs!"

If the Five Scrolls Compact really meddled with the biological research taking place on the planet, then Felixia became an even more attractive destination to Ves! The odds that some of the remarkable exobeasts on the planets exhibited a potent degree of spirituality jumped significantly higher if that was the case!

"Risk is often accompanied by reward."

Naturally, the degree of risk and the height of the potential reward varied enormously from instance to instance. Ves did not have the necessary information to make an accurate judgement whether it was worthwhile for him to proceed with visiting Felixia.

He made a decision based on his feelings, which strongly urged him to go through with his plans to visit the Cat Utopia.

"The planet still has a lot to offer." He concluded. "Who knows where I can find what I need from some other place."

His intuition hinted to him that he probably wouldn't be able to obtain a better spiritual fragment for his Devil Tiger elsewhere. The Planet of Cats was by far the best destination in this region of space for him to secure one of the crucial elements of his upcoming tiger mech design!

Having decided on his course of action, Ves decided to confer with Nitaa about the precautions they needed to take.

When his tall bodyguard entered his stateroom and listened to his speculations, she agreed with some of his concerns.

"Your reasoning may be right, but the CFA and MTA are just as aware, sir. The Big Two normally subject every organization engaging in bioresearch activities to additional monitoring. Genuine Compact researchers will never set foot in such a dangerous place for them. It's much more likely that the Compact quietly set up a splinter organization on the planet."

This realization eased some of their worries. A splinter organization like the Order of Fl'ix in the Kinner Tribe knew much less and were not as dangerous as core Compact cultists.

"There may be people among them who possess the same sensory powers as yours." Ves gestured at her remarkable nose.

"That is true, but unless their ability to distinguish your intangible scent is superior to mine, I'm certain that they won't be able to identify who you really are from all of the geril spice you've been consuming up to now. The spice is really pungent to my empowered nose."

Ves nodded in agreement. "I'll take that chance. Is there anything else to take note of while we're visiting Felixia?"

"Try to act as if you are on a normal holiday. The lackeys of the Compact don't have any reasons to screen the tourists in the first place, but if you stand out too much during the visit they might decide to look into you. Don't let that happen. As long as you maintain a convincing act, then you won't attract any more attention than the hundreds of millions of tourists that visit Felixia every year!"

Even if the Compact and its offshoot organizations were keeping their eyes out on his most valuable possession, the star sector was simply too big! There

was no way they could conduct an intensive search in every corner of the star sector!

At the very least, before the reinforcements from the Ruined Temple arrived at the local Compact cell, Ves expected all of the searches taking place so far to be half-hearted efforts.

Their discussion continued a while longer as they planned out several precautions. Ves resolved to develop a persona of a wealthy mech designer looking to engage in his cat fancy while Nitaa prepared some extra assurances in order to minimize discovery.

The Kinner bondswoman directed her eyes to Lucky. "If you are willing to take the risk, perhaps we can do more. If we manage to identify a suspicious individual or organization, we can send out your cat to spy on them or sabotage their efforts!"

"Meow? Meow!"

Ves tapped his pet on the head. "Don't complain, Lucky! I gave you a very expensive miniaturized stealth generator. If you want to keep making use of this gadget, you better earn your keep!"

"Meow!"

"Just because you're a pet doesn't give you license to laze around!"

"Meow.."

"Look on the bright side. If you spot anything yummy during your jaunts, you can steal some if you want!"

That got Lucky all fired up.

"Meowwww!"

With that taken care of, Ves directed his attention back to Nitaa. "Do you know what the Compact might be after on Felixia?"

She shrugged. "I can't say. It may be that they don't expect to gain anything substantial out of the research being performed there except to steal some of the novel inventions emerging from the labs from time to time."

"Cats and their many genetically-modified variants are the most popular pet category in human space." Ves observed. "Though some would argue that dogs are still better."

"Meow!"

"Haha, don't worry. I'm not thinking about getting a dog anytime soon."

"Cats engineered for intelligence are some of the most prevalent pets that accompany people." Nitaa remarked. "Sir, it has come to my mind that they make for better candidates for empowered noses. Their sense of smell is naturally superior to that of a human. Empowering it even further may lead to a creature who outranges me by an order of magnitude!"

This was a very astute deduction! If the Five Scrolls Compact was serious in pursuing their research into developing a metaphysical sense of smell, then working on highly-modified cats and dogs made a lot more sense!

His face grew grave. "If this is true, then the Compact's presence on Felixia is a lot more important than we thought. I think we should thoroughly look into the research institutions and see if any of them are working specifically on enhancing a cat's sense of smell."

His upcoming visit to Felixia no longer revolved exclusively around obtaining a tiger-based spiritual fragment.

The possibility that the Compact engaged in research related to Nitaa's empowered nose was an opportunity to Ves. If he could obtain their research

files on this topic, then he may be able to use the information to develop a better way of blocking his scent than consuming lots of geril spice!

Even though he liked the spicy taste, lots of people began to see him as a weirdo due to his spice-laden breath!

"Alright, we'll put that on the agenda as well. Is there anything more we should take into account when we arrive on Felixia?"

"I'd like to receive some clarification. If you are going through with your intention to investigate a Crown Cat in person, then you'll have to accompany a hunting team. What are your plans?"

"I've been thinking about forming my own hunting team from the Battle Criers, but they will probably fare poorly during the hunt. The Crown Cats have bested or eluded many experienced mech hunters. Expecting the Battle Criers to do better than specialized hunters is foolish."

"That leaves no other choice than to accompany an existing hunting team. Will they even agree to bring you along?"

"Every hunting team is bringing a maintenance crew along. The terrain can be harsh at times and the scuffles between their mechs and their prey produces serious damage. Constant maintenance is crucial in keeping the hunting mechs in optimal shape for the inevitable confrontation!"

Few mech designers accompanied these hunting teams unless they were truly desperate. The risks were simply too big as many Crown Cats deliberately targeted the transports first!

For this reason, Ves would probably be in high demand if he sought for a spot on one of the mech hunting teams. Not only was he a qualified Journeyman, but he also possessed extensive experience in the field.

He could boast about his wartime exploits to hunting teams with a vacancy on their maintenance crews. He could also showcase that he could work under pressure and that he knew his way around with fixing battle damage.

A Journeyman accompanying a mech hunting team was very remarkable due to the risks involved in every hunt. However, Ves took solace in the fact that it still happened from time to time, so he wouldn't attract too much suspicion.

Nitaa did not look happy about this, but Ves already made up his mind. As long as he found a promising Crown Cat, he would definitely accompany a mech hunting team in order to witness the huge cat in person!

Chapter 1375 The Hunting Industry

The more Ves immersed himself in Felixia's attractions, the greater his anticipation. The Planet of Cats had a lot more to offer than just their Crown Cats, though to Ves the huge mech-sized apex predators remained his top priority.

Studying the Crown Cats and the other huge cats that didn't quite make it into the top twenty gave Ves a lot of inspiration.

He carefully studied all the footage he could get his hands on. While most hunting teams kept their hunting attempts private, some opted to showcase their bravery and skill by publicizing authenticated footage of their hunts.

Even if most of them ended in failure where only half or less hunting mechs ran out of the hunting zone intact, there was no shame in losing against a Crown Cat.

In fact, participating in a hunt already served as sufficient proof of the bravery of the participants! The honor they gained from setting out on a hunt and making it out alive was sufficient to propel them to the top of the mech hunting community!

"Mech hunters are a weird bunch." He muttered. "Instead of piloting mechs out of money, duty or advancing to expert, they are merely in it for the hunt! I never realized that there are so many proponents and traditions involved!"

Huge game hunting became popular activity in some circles. However, it also attracted a decent amount of controversy.

First, it was an inordinately wasteful hobby. Most of the time, the hunting trips always resulted in a loss, as even if the mech hunters succeeded in their attempts, their prey couldn't be sold for too much money.

Critics also questioned the utility to engage in this violent and costly hobby. Mech pilots who enlisted in the military or signed on to a private sector outfit at least served an important societal function. They contributed a lot to their societies.

Even the mech games served a purpose by providing mass entertainment to a huge number of fans. The mech games also focused on combat between mechs, which was highly relevant to anyone active in the mech community.

By far, only wealthy people engaged in huge game hunting, and only a few of them live streamed or published footage of their hunting trips.

Huge game hunting was all about hunting impressive prey. The more dangerous, the more impressive the prey. No one batted an eyelid if a huge game hunter bagged a docile elephant or something.

In order for a hunt to bring prestige to the hunters, the prey had to be capable of fighting back!

For this reason, huge game hunting led to an inordinate amount of waste as many mechs got trashed during difficult hunts.

A lot of mechs got trashed in order to satisfy the vanity of their owners!

Still, as a wealthy individual himself, Ves recognized the appeal of engaging in this activity for those who weren't professional hunters.

"It's all about earning reputation in a semi-controlled environment!"

A wealthy entrepreneur stood out from their peers if they could boast about an impressive hunt. Even if they weren't mech pilots themselves, merely financing and organizing a hunting team and accompanying them in a successful hunting trip was enough to enhance their renown!

The most valuable invisible currency in human space was honor, which mech pilots mainly earned in serious battles.

Huge game hunting did not involve a lot of honor. What the hunters were truly trying to gain was prestige!

This was a particularly classy form of reputation that enhanced the standing of anyone who possessed it! The recognition of accomplishing something challenging was worth quite a lot in contemporary society!

"Successful huge game hunters brag about their successful hunts in the same way I boast about my wartime exploits!" Ves realized.

Hunting trophies served a similar role as medals.

For this reason, a lot of businessmen, nobles and other wealthy people continually kept this perverse activity alive.

Ves sneered at these peacocks. "These people are too afraid to volunteer in the military during wars. The battles that they might be subjected to if they are deployed to the front are highly unpredictable. If they are receive a safer assignment, then they won't be eligible to earn any prestigious medals."

As Ves experienced first hand, war was dangerous and messy. Your own side tried their best to defeat their opponents while the other side tried their best to do the same.

The huge scale of wars also diminished the individual agency of those who participated in the fighting. Many times, Ves lamented his inability to control his own destiny. During his time in the Mech Corps, he functioned as a tiny cog in a very immense machine that followed the instructions of people far above his head.

"Participating in wars is a dangerous and unpredictable way to earn prestige. Hunting trips are much safer in comparison!"

Big game hunting in person and huge game hunting with mechs both offered crucial advantages.

First, hunting was an activity where the leaders and organizers retained a lot of agency. They got to decide where to go, which creatures to hunt, which mechs to field and so on. The risks were a lot more known, so the people involved could precisely calculate how much danger they faced during their hunting trips.

"As long as the hunters gathered sufficient intelligence, the hunting trips become predictable!"

Second, those who engaged in hunting knew exactly what they were getting into. A legitimate hunting trip still posed a threat, but compared to the completely chaotic battles taking place in major wars, the hunters and anyone accompanying them precisely understood the risks! The chances of something unanticipated happening was very low!

"Even hunting the Crown Cats isn't as dangerous as an actual battle!"

Smart and resourceful hunters planned for every scenario. Those who undertook the most challenging hunts still managed to make it out alive with at least some mechs and vehicles intact.

For this reason, Ves looked down on wealthy people who tried to buy prestige in this manner. While it was certainly impressive to participate in the hunt for a

renowned Crown Cat, none of their achievements surpassed his own accomplishments!

"Still, it's better than nothing, I guess." He muttered.

Very few people among the upper classes experienced the hardships that Ves had gone through. These spoiled brats didn't have the stomach to expose themselves to greater risks.

Participating in a hunting trip with assessable risks was already prestigious enough to impress those who didn't have the guts to do the same.

"Well, at least there are some hunters who are doing it out of the love for the hunt."

Ves respected the genuine enthusiasts and professionals in the hunting community. They weren't in it for a season or two, but dedicated their entire lives to the challenges.

"In every hunt, something can always go wrong."

No matter how much the hunters planned ahead and calculated the risks, something catastrophic could always happen.

Perhaps a single attempt may not lead to anything unexpected. However, if hunters continually reentered the hunting zones, then one day they might bite off more than they could chew.

"Of course, the real hunters don't go into carefully-managed hunting zones."

Within the hunting community, the hunters who earned the most prestige consisted of those who entered newly-discovered untamed planets and hunted exobeasts that had never been hunted before!

The competition of earning a 'galaxy first' achievement for bagging a novel exobeast species turned out to be quite intense. A lot of hunters even joined

treasure hunting expeditions to the frontier just so they could encounter and hunt down exotic new alien beasts!

Naturally, these hunts were a lot riskier due to the lack of information. Hunting a completely new beast often meant going in blind. At best, they might squeeze in a few days or weeks to observe their prey and assess some of the dangers.

Earning these so-called galaxy first achievements didn't interest Ves very much, but he understood its appeal to others. It was very difficult for space peasants to find meaning in their lives once they became aware of how little they mattered in the galaxy.

Being the first ones to hunt a formidable species of exobeasts was a good way to leave a mark behind.

Ves felt the same way about his works. Thousands of years from now, he'd probably be dead. Much of the details of his life would fade away with the passage of time as human civilization moved on from the past.

The only legacy that he left behind was his work. As long as he advanced to Star Designer, Ves was assured that his mechs would be remembered and recorded into history for eons!

"Reaching Master is not enough!"

Although Masters enjoyed an immense amount of prestige in today's society, there were too many of them to remember them all. Only the most exceptional and outstanding Masters might stand a chance of lasting longer in people's minds than the more inconsequential ones.

If Ves truly wanted to leave a permanent mark behind in the galaxy, then he had no choice but to reach the pinnacle of mech design!

"Designing the Devil Tiger will help bring me a little closer to that height." He smiled. "Isn't that right, Lucky?"

"Meow."

"It's a long road, I know, but I think this little step will be a very meaningful one."

Ves resumed working on his Devil Tiger design. Studying the immense Crown Cats of Felixia gave him a lot of inspiration on how to develop a deadly predator in the form of a mech.

His mech became more refined, graceful and threatening. Mech designers took inspiration from nature all the time, and this was no different.

Ves merely had to be careful that he didn't straight up rip off the contours, skeletal structure and musculature of a single Crown Cat. What worked for exobeasts didn't necessarily work for mechs.

He also wanted to maintain ownership of his own design. If he copied too many elements from exobeasts, then did he truly understand his own design? Ves had to justify every adjustment and avoid changing something just because it would look closer to one of the awesome-looking Crown Cats.

In addition, Ves also had to work with the peculiar properties of ASMAS. Armor and structural integrity posed significant challenges to him. One of the fundamental downsides to smart metal was that they weren't able to offer the same degree of protection as conventional armor systems.

His Devil Tiger partially compensated for that by utilizing substitute ASMAS that incorporated a lot of possible materials.

If the owners fed the mech something cheap, then the substitute ASMAS being formed would hardly be able to withstand a dent.

If the owners manage to scrounge up something more valuable, then the amount of damage the Devil Tiger withstood rapidly increased.

Ves envisioned a situation where the Devil Tiger may start off modestly but slowly accrued patches of exceptional protective sections. As long as its mech pilot or owners found a couple of chunks of medium or high-grade exotics, then the quality of substitute ASMAS that functioned as its exterior armor continually crawled upwards.

It might take years or even decades of scavenging, but as long as the Devil Tiger avoided getting trashed entirely, it could become a very formidable mech!

"Sadly, it can't completely rely on itself to upgrade all of its systems."

The Devil Tiger he envisioned fell short of a mech that could autonomously upgrade and evolve every aspect of itself. The more crucial and delicate systems such as the neural interface and various other critical functions had to be fixed components that couldn't be substituted by any form of smart metal.

This meant that the owners of the mech had to replace old and outdated parts with newer ones over time.

Ves shrugged. "Even with this shortcoming, it's not too big of a deal. As long as the Devil Tiger itself consents with the upgrade, this can easily be accomplished."

At its heart, the Devil Tiger was still a mech that decided its own fate!

Ves wanted to create a mech that held the upper hand over the humans who piloted and sent it into battle. He took great pleasure in bringing such a machine into being that subverted the rules.

"Normally, the humans are in charge, but this time they are not!" He grinned. "Anyone who thinks they can treat my Devil Tiger as a machine they can use and abuse will be in for a very harsh lesson! Hahaha!"

Chapter 1376 High Stakes

The fleet cut through several states in the journey to the Sentinel Kingdom. The powerful third-rate state loomed closer and closer. Captain Silvestra expected the fleet to arrive at Felixia within a week if everything went right.

"Felixia orbits a very strong star." She noted. "While the star system itself is worthless due to the lack of exotics, its massive and luminescent star is very easy to navigate towards. Whoever selected the star system for colonization made a very excellent choice. The most profitable tourism planets are always found in these kinds of places."

"That will cut our travel time short, right?"

"Correct. The stronger the star, the less stops required to reach our destination."

Michael Crindon, who was also present on the bridge, spoke up as well.

"Felixia draws in a lot of starships from the Sentinel Kingdom and beyond. There's a decent amount of shipyards in the star system where we can begin some of the overhauls we have in store for the Barracuda."

Ves nodded. "I know, I hear the facilities at Felixia aren't as good as in other star systems."

"We'll have to travel to an industrial star system if we want to perform more extensive overhauls. Felixia is an excellent tourism destination but it lacks the infrastructure to support a robust mech and ship industry."

At least the Barracuda still underwent some changes while Ves was mucking about on the Planet of Cats.

For his upcoming visit, Ves couldn't bring along the Battle Criers. Planets dedicated to tourism were usually very strict about the mechs that visitors wished to bring to the surface.

Unless Ves formed his own hunting team, he wasn't allowed to bring down any mechs at all!

"We still have plenty to do, sir." Commander Cinnabar said over the comm from the Ion Tracker. "We can spend some of the time on servicing our starships. Though they are not in a condition that demands critical maintenance, it's a good opportunity to fix them up now to minimize the chance of breakdowns in the future."

"Okay. I'll have my assistant set aside a budget for that. Do you have something else in mind?"

"We could use some shore leave. Spending months at a time aboard our ships can wear a person down. When our fleet is parked close to a popular tourist planet, my men will probably riot if I don't give them the opportunity to relax on the surface!"

Ves nodded in understanding. "Granted. Make sure to rotate your men so that at least some of your people are keeping an eye on our assets."

"That's a given. We know what to do, sir."

An impulse thought suddenly flitted through Ves' mind. "Also, instruct Imon and Casella Ingvar to prepare to accompany me to the surface. They'll be joining Gavin, Crindon and Nitaa as my entourage for this excursion."

"Are you sure about that? The Ingvars are still kind of bratty, though my boys and I have gradually managed to force them to adjust their egos. If they leave our influence, there's a possibility that they might regress to their snobby old selves!"

Ves smirked. "Don't worry about that, commander. I think I'm quite capable of finishing the work you started. Besides, I haven't made much use of the Ingvars so far. Bringing them to Felixia might be helpful considering their background. As former nobles, they probably understand the dynamics in the hunting community a bit more than us. Hunting is a favored pastime for nobles, after all, and the Sentinel Kingdom has a lot of aristocrats who are looking to prove themselves!"

"Stupid brats and their games." Cinnabar cursed. "If they are looking for glory, they can easily find it by beating up some pirates in the Nyxian Gap! At least they'll be doing something useful with their time and money!"

The Sentinel Kingdom's many noble houses competed against each other for wealth, power and influence. Sentinel's internal politics lightly resembled that of the Vesia Kingdom.

The difference between the two states was that the Sentinel Kingdom was larger, stronger and far more cohesive. Sentinel constantly stressed unity in order to resist the frequent incursions against the scum spilling out of the Nyxian Gap every now and then. Colluding with pirates was the biggest crime imaginable in the powerful third-rate state!

The two moved on to another topic.

"So far, we're almost halfway in our journey. What do you think so far about working for me? Have you considered working for me on a more permanent basis?"

"We are still reserving our judgement, sir." The commander calmly replied.

"So far, we have gone through a grand total of one brief battle and a lot of traveling. Don't get me wrong. Some of my boys like the calmer schedule, but there's also another portion of my men who are starting to chafe at the lack of

excitement. Guarding someone for an indefinite period is a lot different than mercenary life where you encounter something new every mission."

Ves expected this kind of answer. "I hope you and your men will make up your mind when we reach the Bright Republic. I think you'll learn I have a lot to offer by that time."

He still held a very compelling means of converting the Battle Criers completely to his side. The number one thing a mech pilot loved the most was a mech, and a good one at that!

As a mech designer, Ves had never showed off his mechs to the Battle Criers before. He hoped that he could still impress the Kinner mercenaries by the end of the trip.

He bet that one good glimpse at the mechs of the Avatars of Myth ought to be enough to convert the majority of the Battle Criers on the spot!

They continued to discuss a few more operational matters before they ended the call.

So far, Ves was very pleased with the Battle Criers. While their battle capabilities were merely average, they had a lot of space smarts and knew their way around in strange and foreign environments.

For someone who intended to go on a grand expedition in the future, having the Battle Criers at his disposal as a division within his Avatars of Myth granted him a lot more flexibility!

He even considered keeping the Battle Criers as a separate and distinct outfit lately.

Ves envisioned the Avatars of Myth as shining beacons and exemplars of battle. They had to serve as a brilliant showcase of all of his mech models in action!

In contrast, Ves did not intend to use the Battle Criers as the standard bearers of his products. Instead, he envisioned a more practical purpose for them as his fixers.

"It's much better if they can be oriented to solve my problems without attracting too much attention."

This did not mean he intended to turn the Battle Criers into his shadow force or something. The Battle Criers were thugs, not spies. Subterfuge, espionage and assassination did not fall within their competences.

Instead, Ves placed them somewhere in the middle. They could perform tasks for him that were too murky for the Avatars of Myth and too banal for his shadow force to put into action and risk exposure.

"So ideally, I'll have three different mech troops at my disposal, each specializing for a different range of missions."

Ves wasn't too sure yet if he wanted to organize his current and future mech forces this way.

Maintaining three separate forces helped them maintain their distinct specialties and mech traditions. However, keeping them separate also led to a fair amount of redundancy, which was very wasteful.

"Well, I'll probably be able to afford it anyway." He scoffed.

Nonetheless, in the back of his mind, he knew he'd have to grow the LMC even more if he wanted to keep up with his growing expenditures.

The same conditions that led to booming business for mech manufacturers also required the companies to bolster their protection. Who knew if the Bright Republic followed the footsteps of the tragic Chuko Republic one day.

He rubbed his chin. "In the end, we can't rely too much on the government, the military or friends to bail us out. Being able to provide for our own security is best."

This was one of the benefits he gained from touring the Chuko Republic and meeting so many struggling mech designers. He learned first-hand how mech designers succeeded or failed to keep their enterprises aloft.

"One thing is for sure. When law and order is deteriorating, you have to fill the void quickly or else you stand to lose everything you worked for!" He exclaimed.

Perhaps he was being unduly paranoid compared to his colleagues, but he didn't care. Not even the Bright Republic enjoyed complete safety and security as random pirates and the Bentheim Liberation Movement constantly punished complacent mech manufacturers.

Later in the day, Calabast called his comm for a status update. Though their regular calls didn't yield any deep discussions due to the compromised nature of their comm calls, his partner still wanted to stay in the loop.

When she heard about his decision to visit Felixia and go on a hunting trip to observe a dangerous huge cat in person, her reaction fell within his expectations.

"I highly advise you to go to the petting zoo region of the planet, Mr. Larkinson." She mildly stated, though Ves could easily sense the hidden irritation in her voice. "The adult section of this safe and accessible region features some extremely docile huge cats, though I believe you may have some difficulty entering it considering your lack of maturity."

Ves pettily shook his head. "Those huge beasts are genetically engineered to be as docile as possible for cat ladies to fawn upon. They don't have a

ferocious bone in their bodies! How am I supposed to design a ferocious bestial mech if all I have for inspiration is grossly-oversized house cats!"

"Meow!"

"You see? Even Lucky agrees! Those artificial abominations are a disgrace to the galactic collective of cat species!"

Calabast palmed her face, partially breaking her role. "The risks of huge game hunting on Felixia are very considerate, particularly when it comes to hunting their Crown Cats!"

"The Crown Cats are some of the most lethal huge cats engineered in the star sector!" Ves grinned and his eyes glimmered as if he could already see them in front of his face! "If I had a choice between getting inspired by the most docile or the most dangerous cats on Felixia, I'll choose the latter any day!"

"VES!" The woman screamed. "The risk of death is far too high to justify this trip! Sure, eight or nine times out of ten, you might be able to make it off alive. However, do you really want your parents to deal with the situation when that doesn't happen?!"

That suddenly stopped his enthusiasm short. "Uh..."

"I can understand it if the reward is worth the risk, but if there's one thing that's wrong with you, it's that you're completely incapable of weighing the risks against rewards! Why do you have to hunt a Crown Cat?! Just to enrich a single mech design?"

"It's not about a single mech! It's about the evolution of my design philosophy!" He protested.

"You dumb kid! I know the Crown Cats attract a lot of attention, but why are you fixating on them as the only solution?! At least consider the less dangerous huge cats first! You can get almost everything you want from them

without gambling with your life! There are many juvenile, growing huge cats on Felixia who might grow into Crown Cats in the future but are still manageable to hunt, have you thought about that?"

"..No."

"Then consider it! Why play a needless high-stakes game that you can't afford to win when there is a much safer low-stakes game right next door? I hope you shake yourself out of your stupidity, Mr. Larkinson!"

Calabast angrily cut the call, leaving Ves with a lot of doubt. His hands worriedly stroked Lucky's back.

"Am I being reckless again?" He whispered to himself.

"Meow."

Chapter 1377: Experimental Mech

The fleet crossed into the Sentinel Kingdom without much fanfare. Nonetheless, Ves and the others immediately noticed the difference when they studied the local ship traffic in the Kingdom's star systems.

"There's a lot of military vessels and mechs on patrol." Ves commented as he viewed the local plot on the bridge.

"The Sentinel Kingdom places a lot more emphasis on control." Captain Silvestra noted. "Mercenary corps still exist in the Kingdom, but they're subject to far more restriction. They have to since many mercenary corps in the past used to maintain secret connections with the Nyxian pirates."

The Sentinel Kingdom's proximity to the Nyxian Gap led to a lot of destructive pirate attacks. Instead of compromising with the pirates, Sentinel instead united together to resist them in almost every sphere.

While the Nyxian pirates still managed to bribe or subvert some local Sentinel influences, the noble houses made sure to keep their noses clean.

All of them had to, since the royal house always cracked down on those who got caught with colluding with the pirates!

The most crucial difference between the Sentinel Kingdom and the Vesia Kingdom was that the latter featured a strong royal house. With the monarchy

in firm charge over the Kingdom, no noble dared to contradict the monarch who ruled the state with an iron fist!

Of course, the downside was that commercial ventures faced a lot of barriers in the state. The royals and nobles captured the majority of industry and trade. Ambitious commoners and greedy foreigners were left with the most troublesome and unprofitable sectors in the economy.

"Sentinel's economy is closed to most foreigners." Ves remarked with regret. "Mech usage is very high here, but most of the market share is captured by domestic mech companies. Unless I befriend a noble house, I can forget about selling my mechs in Sentinel's lucrative mech market."

Different from the Ylvaine Protectorate, the Sentinel Kingdom's mech market fared a lot better despite the lack of foreign competition. The perpetual fighting against the pirates spilling out of the Nyxian Gap forced the local mech designers to become very good at their jobs.

Those who thought they could coast their way through success would quickly find their products ignored in favor of better-performing models!

When lives were on the lines and battles could be won and lost due to a crucial difference in quality, Sentinel's mech forces couldn't afford to indulge in patronage and other corrupt practices!

Large territory, strong cohesion, a strong central power, persistent external pressure and other conditions shaped the Sentinel Kingdom into arguably the strongest third-rate state in the star sector!

Though their strength and prosperity obviously fell short against the second-rate states, they were still considerably stronger than the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom combined!

Naturally, the Sentinel Kingdom suffered from its problems. Its efficiency in non-military sectors ranked below average as many noble estates derived fat profits from the overall lack of competitive pressure.

In many cases, the prices of many goods did not match their quality levels. Commoners weren't being paid very well and had less money to spend on overpriced goods and services.

Nonetheless, while the lower classes enjoyed considerably less luxuries, their safety and basic needs were fully met. As long as the military did a good job of protecting Sentinel space from pirates, the citizens remained content.

"One important trait to take note of when you visit this state is that Sentinels are very proud of their state, sir. Questioning their rulers or how the Kingdom is being run will attract a lot of animosity from the locals."

"I'm aware, captain. This isn't the first place I've visited where the locals are strongly committed to their state."

It reminded Ves of the Ylvaine Protectorate and how most Ylvainans looked up to the three ruling dynasties. Blending in state and church aided a lot in keeping the local Ylvainans subservient to authority.

One key difference that distinguished Sentinel from Ylvaine and Vesia was the lack of upward mobility.

The commoners from the two neighboring states of the Bright Republic offered various opportunities for the lower classes to climb their way upwards.

In the Ylvaine Protectorate, talents and exceptionally hard-working Ylvainans attracted the attention of one of the leading dynasties. The Poxcos, Curins and Kronons regularly issued invitations to adopt the promising Ylvainans.

In the Vesia Kingdom, commoners who earned a lot of merits in battle or became notable scientists or such might receive a noble title! The state deliberately set up avenues for commoners to promote into nobility in order to keep the masses content and to keep the noble houses from growing too complacent!

The cutthroat infighting within Vesia occasionally led to situations where vigorous common-born nobles had successfully managed to topple established noble houses! Despite their rich heritage, as long as they lost their dynamism, they failed to maintain their standing!

"Within the Sentinel Kingdom, commoners will always remain commoners with almost no exception."

Only high-ranking mech designers and mech pilots had the opportunity to buy or earn their way into nobility, but they all had to contribute a lot to the state in the process.

Nonetheless, even if Ves did not entirely agree with the way the local blue bloods ran their state, it wasn't any of his business. At the very least, the high security and stable economy contrasted sharply with the conditions in Chuko, thereby making it a lot safer for Ves to travel around in the state!

Once Ves finished discussing some matters with the captain, he left the bridge and returned to his stateroom in order to devote the remainder of his time to designing his mech.

As he summoned up his incomplete design schematic, he sighed at the many areas which remained in limbo.

"There's so much I can't decide upon yet without obtaining a solid direction."

Ves adopted a different design process than before. In his previous designs, he always formed his images and obtained his spiritual fragments before he proceeded with the meat of the design process.

Right now, he was embarking on the latter without securing the former. This effectively meant he had been designing his mech without a concrete vision to guide his work!

Normally, Ves opposed designing his mechs half-cocked, but this was a very different situation.

First, he needed to finish his design during his stay in the Sentinel Kingdom. His mech functioned best in only a couple of chaotic planetary environments in the Nyxian Gap. It wouldn't be of much use when employed by a regular mercenary corps or mech regiments.

Second, even if Ves hadn't found an ideal tiger-like spiritual fragment as of yet, he could still lay down the groundwork by designing what every tiger mech had in common.

A key attribute of his mech that made this approach a lot more viable was its malleability.

"My Devil Tiger is a mech that is designed to be open to change from its inception!"

Working with smart metal and especially ASMAS granted Ves a lot more flexibility in how to configure the mechanical layout of his mech.

No matter how high, low, wide, narrow, long, short he designed a specific subcomponent, he could always shift it into another shape later on when he had a better idea on the final shape of his design.

If something didn't work after he produced his mech? Then he could just adjust the programming of the ASMAS and let the mech adjust its shape on the fly!

"An ASMAS mech is practically a maintenance-free mech!"

This was the biggest charm in working with a mech that consisted of at least sixty percent of smart metal!

If not for the exorbitant cost that even made Gloriana wince in pain, Ves would have liked to take ASMAS even further and incorporate it into some of his other mech designs!

"It's too darn expensive!"

For the time being, the Devil Tiger would probably remain as his only smart metal mech in a very long time. He couldn't even take credit for designing it since he broke so many rules during the design process.

From pirating component licenses without paying their rightful owners to granting the mech so much autonomy that it could harm its mech pilot, the Devil Tiger embodied some of the MTA's worst nightmares in one single design!

"Hehehe." Ves self-indulgently chuckled. "The stuffy internal mech designers of the Association will probably suffer heart attacks when they see my design!"

Of course, after they got over their shock, they'd probably arrest or kill him outright for egregiously violating their precious rules and regulations!

One aspect that Ves paid a lot of attention to in recent days was the configuration of the neural interface. This vital component within the cockpit strongly affected the relationship between the mech and mech pilot.

"According to Old Man Terrance, this single component is far more impactful than I realized!"

In his past design processes, whenever he came across the neural interface, he merely copied over one of the standard neural interface models from the MTA. Each neural interface model developed or endorsed by the MTA gained a reputation for safety and stability.

To mech designers who didn't specialize in neural interfaces, this was all the information they needed to make use of these deceptively low-risk components.

"I can't brush past this decision like I used to in the past." He muttered to himself. "Neural interfaces are far more influential and much less safe than I previously thought!"

Whereas before he saw the MTA-approved neural interfaces as universally safe, now he regarded them as barbed roses.

"They look good and smell nice, but you can easily cut your hand if you hold them improperly!"

Nonetheless, the beauty of roses might be worth the risk to some.

What Ves wanted to do with his Devil Tiger was to explore an extreme. What if he broke the mold of his previous design and deliberately made use of a neural interface with much looser restrictions than the MTA approved?

Less restrictions meant the mech pilot could immerse himself a lot deeper into his connection with the mech. This led to both upsides and downsides.

The obvious drawback was that the negative feedback would be amplified. In the wrong conditions, this might lead to much more severe brain damage in the event of suffering from damage.

"I don't think any mech pilot can last more than five straight years with my Devil Tiger!" He guessed.

This was an extremely awful projection! Normally, mech pilots ought to be able to pilot their mech for fifty or a hundred years without suffering any debilitating effects.

Cutting all of that short to merely five years meant that the Devil Tiger would likely prove fatal to many mech pilots if it managed to last a couple of decades or more!

Despite the immense potential harm his Devil Tiger could do to its mech pilots, the advantages were just as spectacular.

Ves obsessed over the man-machine connection. Lately, he faintly developed a notion that what he had managed to achieve with his previous mech designs only scratched the surface of what it could do.

With much less restrictive safety limits, a closer spiritual melding of man and machine could take place, leading to a vastly greater degree of mutual strengthening and cooperation!

"The core of my design philosophy revolves around symbiosis, after all! If I don't explore this method of empowering it, I won't be able to let it go!"

It was better that he indulged in his desire to explore the limits of neural interfaces in an illegal, one-off mech design than in one of his commercial projects! Ves would never dare to unleash something as harmful to the mech pilot as his Devil Tiger to his loyal customers!

"It's better to sell my mech to a Nyxian pirate." He grinned. "Even if the poor fellow's head blows up, it's no big deal!"

Now that he thought about it, pirates might be the ideal test subjects he had always been looking for. Most of them were scum with numerous crimes

under their belt. No one cared if his experiments proved fatal as long as he limited his wild experiments to their kind!

"Hahahaha!" He bent back his head in laughter, causing Lucky to look up at him in alarm! "I should have thought of it sooner! Let my Devil Tiger be my inaugural experimental mech!"

Chapter 1378 Four Continents

As Ves continually tinkered with his Devil Tiger, his fleet smoothly entered the Felixia System.

Just like any other major tourism destination, the Felixia System became host to a lot of starships.

A considerable amount came from other states, but plenty of Sentinels headed towards the famed Planet of Cats as well. The high proportion of foreigners in the state made Felixia a lot more welcoming than other places within the Sentinel Kingdom!

"Business is booming." Ves observed as he called up the local plot.

Thousands of vessels were transitioning in and out of FTL in the inner system. Most of the ships consisted of fuel-efficient passenger liners who transited tourists from neighboring foreign states at affordable prices.

As far as tourist destinations went, Felixia did not attract the highest number of visitors in the Sentinel Kingdom.

However, its many varieties of cats and cat-based services constantly attracted a very generous inflow of cat lovers!

When it came to their passion for cats, they freely opened their wallets and bank accounts. This made Felixia very profitable to the Noble House of Laterna, whose founders developed Felixia into the most prominent Cat Utopia in the star sector!

"About half of the tourists are cat lovers." Captain Silvestra mentioned.

"They're crazy about cats and can be completely unreasonable when the

topic shifts towards them. No matter how many times they visit Felixia, they always come back to undergo another cat nirvana."

"I know." Ves replied while he hugged Lucky against his chest. "I'm looking forward to visiting it myself!"

"Be sure to buy an organic cat ear headband, then! I hear that it's all the rage these days."

"Maybe I'll do so." He chuckled.

Nitaa and him developed a plan to cast him as a mild cat enthusiast when he visited the planet. Though Ves honestly did not adore them as much as the genuine cat lovers that frequent Felixia, disguising himself as one of them was a good idea to avoid attention.

Some cat lovers could be quite eccentric, so much so that they would probably be declared insane in any other place!

Felixia served as their refuge and their paradise. Whereas on other planets they had to keep their behavior in check, on the Planet of Cats they could fully unleash their true nature among like minded enthusiasts!

"If you think about it, the Planet of Cats is literally a temple for cats." The captain remarked. "While many casual tourists visit Felixia in order to enjoy a completely new experience, others are treating it as a holy pilgrimage!"

The description caused Ves to grimace. If there was one thing he hated, it was fanatics who unflinchingly believed in something to the point of losing their common sense!

As much as he wanted to deny Captain Silvestra's words, he knew that there were some odd people in the galaxy who adored cats above humans! As Felixia centered around everything related to cats, much of those crazies congregated to the planet like moths to the flame!

"Many of those crazies flock to the Eron Continent, though." He stated. "The cat worshippers love nothing more than to hug all of the cats that roam the cities, villages and wilderness of this continent!"

Felixia featured four distinct continents. House Laterna, which founded and developed Felixia, engineered each continent towards a distinct purpose.

Eron was a hemisphere-sized petting zoo and playground. Tame cats of all sizes and harmless prey populated much of its idyllic landscapes.

Cat lovers and families with young children spent weeks or even months on this landmass without ever getting tired of all the cats they could hug and play with! Literally billions of docile cats ensured that no one ran out of cats to hug!

Ozzo had been turned into a big game hunting paradise. Cats whose sizes ranged from mice to bears prowled the diverse environments of the Ozzo Continent.

Unlike the harmless and domesticated cats on Eron, most of the felines on Ozzo still retained their wildness! Aside from the cats of the start zones, the Ozzo cats were very much capable of killing their hunters!

While the prestige of hunting an Ozzo big cat was fairly significant, it paled in comparison to the much more extravagant huge game hunting that took place on the largest continent of the planet!

Asco's sheer size and diversity of biomes housed many expansive hunting zones, each of which supported a specific mix of dangerous huge cats the size of dinosaurs or greater!

Aside from the three continents open to tourists, the Talin continent served as the administrative and research hub for Felixia. House Laterna also based themselves in the continent and guarded it very tightly against unauthorized visits.

Talin's remoteness and inaccessibility posed a very significant challenge to Ves. While the other continents housed a large number of small-scale research outposts, they only hosted a minute amount of core research data.

If Ves or Nitaa identified a suspect researcher aligned to the Five Scrolls Compact, then they might not be able to obtain anything useful.

While Lucky could sneak into any facility with his abilities, it was hard to cross an entire ocean and roam undetected for days in a continent that House Laterna avidly guarded against any intrusion!

He left the bridge after he became assured that nothing unusual took place on Felixia. No terrorist attacks or major accidents occurred.

Not a single docile cat killed any humans on the Eron Continent, though many tourists regularly incurred injuries when they handled a cat too roughly.

The hunters on foot in Ozzo left the planet with bundles of trophies in tow. A portion of them even wore their new overcoats made from the fur they harvested from their successful hunts with pride.

As for the Asco Continent, business was booming as always. Even though some mechs, mech pilots and support personnel never came back alive from hunting the huge cats, a continual influx of hunting teams and their sponsors continually entered the depths of the hunting zones to challenge the mighty Crown Cats.

As the Barracuda and her escorts slowly traveled to Felixia I, Ves spent his remaining time on refining his mech design and preparing for his impending visit.

Due to the various rules and regulations House Laterna imposed on every visitor, Ves wasn't allowed to bring a single weapon onto the surface of the Eron Continent!

This rule annoyed Nitaa to no end. If they really met with any trouble, they could only resort to their fists and feet to fight back!

Fortunately, House Laterna maintained a very strong guard on the surface. Rulebreakers knew better than to start any trouble, especially since Eron highly prized its family friendly nature.

Adults looking for more excitement could instead visit Ozzo or Asco to indulge in more violent pleasures.

Once Ves had his fill of the Eron Continent, he and his entourage were allowed to carry some of their weapons and equipment when they visited the Asco Continent.

With so many dangerous people and wildlife roaming Asco, self-protection was not only prudent, but advised!

"The settlements on Asco are not very secure." Nitaa noted during their final meeting before landing on the surface. "We will have to watch out for ourselves while we're there. Drunken brawls and deadly fights between hunters happen frequently."

"Why doesn't House Laterna secure the Asco settlements more strictly?" Crindon asked.

"It's because hunters sometimes need an outlet for their frustration. When their mechs are downed and in the process of being restored, when they suffer injuries which puts them out of the cockpit and when they are waiting for sponsors and organizers to hire them, they often get bored. The hunting community attracts all kinds of people. Sadly, some of them are rather rougher than we'd like."

"Kind of like pirates or criminal gang members." Ves added. "They're the same type of people. The ones on Asco merely decided to wear the coat of a hunter."

"Will we have to hire additional guards?"

"It's fine, Crindon. From what I've read, a single well-armed bodyguard is enough to deter most trouble makers. That aside, the hunters know better than to molest a wealthy visitor. People like me are seen as potential sponsors who can fund an expensive foray into the hunting zones."

It cost a lot of money to conduct huge game hunting. Many hunting outfits in Felixia weren't able to pay for all of their expenditures through their own activities.

Hunting the huge mech-sized cats on Felixia almost never paid off! Aside from hunting down a prestigious Crown Cat and putting up the trophies for auction, the remains of all the other huge cats simply couldn't be compared!

Even if a slain huge cat yielded a lot of money, the hunting outfits had to pay a significant amount of taxes to House Laterna for making use of their hunting zones.

"Speaking of hunters, have you decided upon which hunting outfit we'll accompany, sir?"

Ves shook his head. "Not yet. I'm not even sure which huge cat I want to study up close. I'll make my choice later when I get some first-hand information from the hunters at Asco. Depending on the difficulty of hunting down my desired target, I'll hire a regular or a premier hunting team."

This time, he put Calabast's advice under serious consideration. Though he felt inordinately drawn to the Crown Cats, he did not necessarily have to obtain a spiritual fragment from a creature likely to kill him instead!

The huge cats ranked far below the most vicious and cruel of their kind might possess what he sought. Seeking out the younger and more juvenile among their kind exposed him to far less risk, though the spiritual fragment he expected to gain would probably be significantly weaker.

"You're not taking the Crown Cats into consideration, sir?" Nitaa asked with a hint of relief in her voice.

He smiled at her. "The elite hunting outfits that predominantly focus on hunting the Crown Cats and other formidable huge cats aren't easy to hire or sponsor. They only associate themselves with clients who know what they are doing and have participated in numerous lesser hunting trips. A newcomer and a complete unknown in the local hunting community like me won't be able to get access to them without an introduction."

He looked into the customs of the hunting community on Felixia and found out about how difficult it was to approach the better hunting outfits.

Just like with the Kinners, the hunters based in Felixia paid a lot of attention to reputation and familiarity. The better the hunting group, the more selective they became.

Merely having a lot of money didn't guarantee their acceptance, as many hunting teams previously suffered immensely when they got into bed with awful clients who needlessly risked their lives!

"Do you already have a huge cat in mind, sir?"

"I've formed a list, but there's still too many names. As I've said, I don't know for sure which of the known huge cats. I need to make a more thorough investigation on the ground."

It was difficult for him to explain what exactly he sought from the huge cats. Perhaps Nitaa might have some clues given that she knew one of his secrets, but Crindon, Gavin and the rest thought that Ves was being eccentric again.

Ves didn't consider himself eccentric. His goals were just beyond everyone's understanding!

"Meow."

Lucky climbed up his shoulder and arrogantly licked his paws.

"I know, I know. Regardless of how huge and impressive those mech-sized cats appear, you'll always be the best cat in the galaxy!"

"Meow!"

"Although... if there's a cat out there who's more powerful than you, who knows if you'll have a companion to play with. Doesn't that sound like a great idea, Lucky?"

"MEOW!"

Lucky hit his head with his paw and rudely jumped off his shoulder. His cat really didn't like to share, it seemed!

"At least I'll be on the lookout for a pet for Ketis! She deserves some companionship too, you know!"

Chapter 1379 Cat Temptations

"Mew.. mrrrrrew.."

"Meow meow meow!"

"Miaooooow! Miaooooow!"

Cats. Cats everywhere. As soon as Ves touched down at the busy spaceport with his entourage in tow, he immediately confronted hundreds of free range cats!

The entire spaceport adopted a very friendly cat theme. Smiling animated cats projected all over the place delighted the children of the families that had just begun their vacation.

Of course, many families also brought their own cats along. Organic cats, mechanical cats and virtual cats all meowed at each other as if they were chatting to each other like humans!

Strangely enough, Lucky refused to partake in the pointless exchange of meows. Like an emperor among peasants, the gem cat merely stuck up both his head and his tail as if he awaited the adoration of lesser cats!

...

Unfortunately, hardly any cat acknowledged Lucky's existence! This was an absolute travesty to him! Didn't these cats realize that an eminent example of their kind was among them? Did they just dismiss him as if he was a common house cat?!

"MEOOOOOWWW!!!"

Ves dinged Lucky's flank with his knuckle. "Pipe down, Lucky. Don't cause a disturbance here. There are kids around and lots of security to ensure nothing spoils their fun!"

Amidst all the bright visuals and friendly cats, a lot of guards and bots patrolled the halls in order to keep the peace.

Naturally, none of the guards wore intimidating suits of armor. Instead, they wore bright uniforms with cartoonish cats depicted across their surface. Every security guard maintained a smile or at least a friendly demeanor in order to present a happy facade. Even their weapon had been designed to resemble cat-themed toys!

"Don't mistake these guards as weaklings." Nitaa warned them all. "The men who guard a busy spaceport like this one are skilled in many different areas. Not only that, but they are very perceptive and can spot anyone that poses a threat to public safety."

Crindon nodded in agreement. "Even their weapons are deceptively capable. All the extra components shaped like cat limbs or cat tails are additional modules supporting alternate firing modes. They can discharge a variety of both lethal and non-lethal projectiles."

"Can you guys relax?" Gavin complained. "We're here for a holiday, right? There's no reason to assess the strength of the guards!"

"Benny is right. I know you're just doing your jobs, but don't look too jumpy."

Compared to Nitaa and Crindon who were warily looking everywhere for potential threats, the two nobles who accompanied them looked much more at ease.

"Thanks for bringing us along, Mr. Larkinson." Imon Ingvar said. "Staying cooped up on the Ion Tracker for months on end is not how I envisioned my first mercenary mission."

Casella Ingvar whacked her brother's side. "You should be lucky that nothing has happened! We're still earning our pay even if we never have the opportunity to fight. Our presence alone serves as a deterrence!"

The group slowly moved out of the spaceport and took a cat-shaped transit vehicle that brought them straight to a nearby city.

Not surprisingly, Ves stood out from the crowd. Most visitors consisted of Sentinel commoners or middle-class foreigners looking to experience something novel and different.

While Ves did spot people with means at the spaceport, they were few and far between. The Eron Continent held very little attraction to power-hungry people who desired to enhance their reputation and prestige! Hugging friendly cats all day was not going to do their stature any good!

"Mr. Larkinson, can I ask you a question?" Imon asked.

"Sure."

"Why did you decide to visit the Eron Continent?"

Ves smiled. "Why not?"

"Eron is just for kids and cat lovers. There's nothing related to combat or mechs going on here!"

"Exactly. Before I visit the Asco Continent in order to try my luck, I want to see the other sides of Felixia first. If the cat on my shoulder isn't obvious enough, let me tell you that I adore cats!"

In truth, he liked dogs and other animals as well, but right now he wanted to maintain the act of a cat person!

Fortunately, Felixia made it really easy for people to love their cats.

Even now, various photogenic cats lounging in the cat-shaped vehicle lounged on the laps of delighted passengers. Children, women and even men couldn't help but surrender at the cuteness emanated by the friendly cats. Lots of squeals and petting ensued!

Just as a white long-haired persian cat neared their seats was about to hop onto Ves' lap, Lucky suddenly hissed.

"Meow!"

"Maw!"

The persian cat jumped like a frightened kitten and immediately bolted through a small cat-sized tunnel beneath the seats! His fluffy white tail snaked through the gap like a withdrawing snake!

"Why did you do that, Lucky?"

"Meow."

"I pet you practically every day! I'm not your exclusive property, you know. Sometimes I'd like to touch real fur instead of your bony hard shell!"

"Meow!"

Ves could only admit defeat against his unyielding cat. Lucky often acted aloof when they were by themselves, but now that Ves visited an entire planet filled with cats, his pet suddenly turned into a jealous husband!

Gavin and some of the others tried to stifle their laughs and hide their amusement.

"Seriously though, I'm also visiting Eron for another reason." Ves explained to his group. "There's a lot of pets and services related to genetic modification for sale. Both cats and humans undergo a lot of changes every day."

"Are you interested in getting cat ears or something, boss?"

"My genome can't take anymore additions. It's already highly optimized and adding different organs will just mess that up. I merely want to take in the sights and see how popular these services are. I think genetic modification is making a resurgence again."

Truly, catgirls and catboys thoroughly redeemed the awful reputation that genetic modification once acquired during the latter days of the Age of Conquest!

A couple of them were even not too far away in the transit vehicle! Their distinctive cat ears decked with fur in the same color as their hair attracted a lot of envious glances from the other passengers!

Once the vehicle arrived at its destination, the passengers arrived at a parking zone that lay right in the middle of a bright and beige-colored city!

Trees, nooks, boxes and lines stretching over their heads provided a myriad of places for cats to saunter or doze upon. Meows echoed throughout the streets as thousands of cats played with themselves or the gleeful visitors who bought various toys and snacks from the nearby vendors.

"So many cats..." Gavin emptily muttered. "This is a cat lover's heaven!"

To Ves, he felt as if he entered a cartoon version of a city. Almost everything took on a cat theme as even the cleaning bots looked like mechanical cats!

"Look Lucky, unlike you, your cousins are being productive! You could learn a thing or two about them and be more useful for once!"

"Meow!"

Lucky angrily swatted his head with his tail. It was a travesty to equate him to a cleaning bot!

"Oh come on, lighten up, Lucky! This planet should be paradise for you! Go play around for a while!"

Ves grabbed Lucky's body off his shoulder and placed him on a raised perch shaped like a large cat bed. An organic feline meowed in curiosity as Lucky suddenly dropped.

"Miaow..?"

"Meow!"

"Miaow!"

The organic cat jumped on Lucky and both creatures quickly started to wrestle around!

Ves led the others away while Lucky became engrossed in teaching the other cat a lesson!

"Is it okay to leave Lucky behind?" Gavin asked.

"It's fine. Don't you see the others letting their pets run all over the place? Eron is a place where all cats can indulge in themselves, not just the ones who were born and raised here from the start."

If Ves wanted to interact with other cats, having a jealous and possessive companion like Lucky around made it very difficult for him to do so!

Indeed, once Lucky got distracted by all of the pleasures that Felixia had to offer, Ves managed to pick up pleading cats and hugged them without any interruption.

Even some of his other companions had become swayed by all the fuzzy cuteness surrounding them. Imon held a bright green cat exobeast with two tails while Casella cuddled with a larger tiger-striped house cat.

"You know, a part of me wants to live here forever. There's an endless amount of cats to play and cuddle with!" Gavin exclaimed as he lifted a hefty maine coon in his arms. "Do you notice the lack of outside transmissions? Eron is completely cut off from the worries and troubles of the outside galaxy. I can't even access the galactic net from my comm."

Their comms only connected to the planetary network. Only the most urgent messages got sent through, and to receive other messages the guests had to visit a specialized comm center. Ves recognized this as a deliberate measure to provide their guests with an uninterrupted cat experience.

"I feel the same way, Benny. If House Laterna didn't prohibit companies from setting up shop in their star system, I would have been tempted to move my headquarters here as well!"

The Eron Continent's cat attractions thoroughly won over their hearts. The sheer amount of cuteness in sight overruled their previous conceptions. The sheer energy the surrounding people spent on the cats was like a charged atmosphere that encouraged even the most skeptical people to begin adoring the fluffy, innocent animals!

"Cat ears! Get your organic cat ears here! Get the latest model, they'll last for decades!"

Ves turned his attention to a number of stalls selling cultivated cat ears and cat tails of all things. Out of curiosity, he approached one of them and browsed at the items for sale.

"Nyaaaaah, hey there, customer!" A cute teenage salesgirl greeted him from the other side of the stall. Her maroon tail twitched excitedly behind her back while her twin pointed cat ears perked upwards. "Would you like to sample the latest products developed from our labs, nyaah? Felixia's best geneticists have poured countless hours to develop the best, safest and most responsive organic cat attachments in the star sector! They're completely functional while remaining completely removable, nyaaaaaaah!"

"Is that what you're wearing right now?" Ves curiously asked.

"Nyaaaaah!"

"Is that a yes or a no?"

The girl puffed up her cheeks. "Who do you think I am, nyaah? As a born and raised Felixian, of course my cat attachments are real! See?!"

She sharply tugged at her cat ears, causing her to yelp. "Nyaaah! It hurts!"

"Okay, okay, no need to hurt yourself!" Ves raised his palm. He couldn't bear to see a cute catgirl in pain! "Do you have a pair of ears that match my hair color?"

"Oh, we do, but you'd look even better with different colors, nyaah!"

"No thanks. I'm too old for that. Give me the black ones."

The catgirl seller pulled out a box from underneath the stall and opened them up to show off two, furry cat ears laying dormant while hooked up to some sort of cultivating machine to keep them alive and healthy.

The catgirl took the ears out of the box and gestured Ves to lean over, which he did. Once his head came within reach, the salesgirl expertly placed them on top of his head.

The bottom side of the cat ears did not press against his hair but weaved through them instead. Ves felt as if two squirming tentacles stuck themselves on the top of his head. It was a slightly unnerving situation, but the sensation quickly passed.

Surprisingly, once the black-furred cat ears finished settling in, his eyes widened in surprise as he actually started hearing sounds from his cat ears!

Not only that, but his range of hearing expanded to a range beyond the human norm! He heard various sounds in the air that he previously couldn't hear but were as obvious as day to cats!

"These ears are amazing!"

"Nyaaah! Of course they are!" The catgirl grinned. "They're the latest and most premium products that came from our labs! They contain their own auditory processing organs and are able to transmit their sensory data to your head through safe, non-invasive, organic and remote transmission! Nyaaah!"

"Wow."

"If you think this pair of ears are already great, you should consider implanting them permanently on your head, nyaaah! If you become like me, your sense of hearing will improve at least five-fold!"

Ves became seriously tempted at the offer!

Chapter 1380 Ves the Catboy

Ves knew better than to implant cat ears onto his head on a permanent basis. Playing with toys like the ones attached to his head right now was fine for a short period of time, but he did not wish to be stuck with them forever!

He had become very paranoid about his body changes in recent years. Having the mad Dr. Jutland mess with almost every aspect of his body years ago had left an invisible scar behind.

Who knew what kind of hidden bioprogramming the organic products carried. They might even be a possible means for House Laterna to keep tabs on everyone who used their products!

Even their cats themselves were rather suspect, now that he thought about it. Every cat he spotted displayed intelligence beyond baseline house cats. Who knew if their instincts contained programming that induced them to spy or steal from their owners.

Still, as long as Ves didn't buy any of the products, there was no harm in indulging in them for a while. He didn't hesitate about the organic cat ears placed on top of his head and readily paid for them without thinking about it further.

"Nyaaah! Thank you for your patronage, customer!" The catgirl gleefully cheered as the money transferred over. "By the way, why not add a tail while you're at it? Your new look won't look complete without an elegant tail sticking out of your—"

Ves quickly shook his head. "No thanks. The ears are already enough. Tails are a bit of a hassle and it'll be a pain to sit on chairs."

"That's no problem at all, nyaaah! All of the chairs and seats in Felixia feature a convenient hole where you can freely stick out your tail!"

Despite the catgirl's protestations, Ves refused her suggestion and already moved on. As they calmly browsed the strange cat-themed goods for sale, Gavin and the rest of his companions looked at him weirdly.

"What's the matter with you guys?" He frowned as his black-furred cat ears twitched in irritation.

\"...\"

\\"You look.. different.\" Gavin lamely replied. \\"No offense boss, but most of the time you're always serious and focused on your work. Seeing you with a pair of cat ears is... disturbing.\"

Ves maintained a flat expression, which looked even stranger now with his new additions!

\\"Even I want to enjoy some fun sometimes, you know. It's just that you haven't seen me having fun while I'm working on my design projects. I'll have you know that I am still capable of laughing!\"

\\"Are those ears really great?\"

\\"They're quite fantastic actually. Whoever engineered them did a good job in making them feel unobtrusive. I quite like the enhanced hearing, though I don't know how they managed to do that. I'm definitely going to study them in more detail once I return to the Barracuda!\"

Ves suspected that the cat ears incorporated some aspects of neural interfaces in a limited and miniaturized form.

The group moved on to a stall selling miniatures of bestial mechs. From ferocious tiger mechs to agile cat mechs, the diminutive models on display represented almost every variety of cat-based mech in use in the star sector!

The stall also offered a selection of non-feline bestial mechs. Their inclusion livened up the display and enriched their vision.

\\"It's a shame the Komodo Star Sector doesn't have a strong bestial mech tradition.\" He idly remarked as he studied the wares from the lens of a mech designer. \\"These mechs are all successful products in the markets they emerged, but...\"

\\"Most mech buyers still prefer humanoid mechs.\" Gavin summed up.

Imon Ingvar scoffed from the side. "Animal mechs are a pain to get used to. While their mobility is great on rough terrain, it's not worth the trouble of mastering them when humanoid mechs can fulfill the same almost just as well."

"Humanoid mechs and bestial mechs each have their own advantages." Ves sagely replied. "It's just that the conditions in a remote star sector like ours doesn't offer the best conditions to showcase the strengths of the latter."

The learning curve of bestial mechs was higher than that of humanoid mechs. The additional hurdle of adjusting to an animal-shaped body required additional directed training that some mech academies simply couldn't afford to include in their curriculums.

While they argued about the merits of bestial mechs, Ves made sure to reserve some of his attention on studying the miniatures on display. Each piece represented a really successful mech model.

Only a handful of spaceborn mechs counted in their midst despite their higher utility in battles in space. The predominantly bird-shaped mechs functioned pretty much like fighter craft as they eschewed limbs and in some cases even wings in order to present an efficient package optimized for battles without solid ground or gravity in the mix.

"Why aren't spaceborn bestial mechs more popular among you spaceborn pilots?" Ves asked the Ingvars directly.

Imon sneered. "They don't pilot like real mechs. They're worse than frontline mechs because they don't have articulated limbs. When you strip a mech of its arms and legs and slap a couple of weapon barrels on their flanks, they've lost almost everything that makes a mech a mech! No mech pilot I know enjoys piloting these fake mechs! The only ones who do are those whose genetic aptitudes don't allow them to pilot anything better!"

This sounded like a prejudiced answer to Ves. Nonetheless, what Imon just said encapsulated the outlook of many mech pilots towards these types of mechs.

His sister offered a more nuanced opinion.

"Bestial mechs in space may perform better when you look at their numbers, but most of us prefer to stick to a humanoid form. Even the legs that some of you mech designers find redundant can still be useful. Flying around in a mech without legs like most frontline mechs designed for space warfare end up is way too disturbing."

The two mech pilots both underscored the comfort that a humanoid form provided. Ves understood their sentiment, though a part of him still thought that mech pilots were being a bit too inflexible.

"Spaceborn bestial mechs still have their roles. Even if they aren't as flexible as humanoid mechs, they are simply more efficient if you compare by tonnage."

The Ingvars and Ves still disagreed with each other, but that was fine. As a mech designer, Ves ought to be tolerant of the opinions of his customers.

After he finished studying the various miniatures, the group moved on to browse the other goods for sale.

During their stroll, Ves continually prodded the cat ears planted on top of his head with his fingers and his thoughts. It was uncanny how real they felt and how comfortably they melded in his conscious and unconscious body operation.

Since he currently grew his messy black hair long enough to cover almost both of his human ears, to all intents and purposes Ves looked no different from the catgirls and catboys in the crowd! They even raised their cats at him in greeting as if he was a fellow member of their cat cult!

"Are those ears nice, boss?"

"They're actually quite pleasant. I think I'll keep them for as long as they last." Ves replied with increasing satisfaction. "They're so soft. Petting them and feeling the sensation of having your ears being petted is quite sublime."

He simply couldn't stop touching his cat ears! There was just something soothing and addicting about his ears being caressed. Faint memories of his younger self being hugged and embraced by his then-living mother came to the fore. What would she think when she saw him right now?

"Can you buy me a pair as well?"

"Go buy your own if you fancy them so much."

Gavin looked sick. "I can't afford them! You don't pay me enough!"

"Then buy something that is priced within your means! There are plenty of cheaper organic cat ear attachments for sale!"

"They aren't as good as yours!"

"Then too bad! I'm not giving you a raise."

"How about a bonus then for my loyal service so far?"

"Let's wait for the performance evaluations that happen at the end of the year."

As the space peasant lamented his poverty, Ves gleefully diverted to a nearby park and began playing around with the cats who idled there and looked for human companionship.

He picked up a handsome grey-striped shorthair cat that oozed coolness. The aloof cat exhibited masculinity in a way that probably attracted a lot of female cats during mating season!

"Mrow?" The cat mewled when a random human picked him up. "Mrow."

\nYou're pretty mature for your kind.\n

\nMroww.\n

\nI'm not like other humans.\n

\nMrow!\n

\nHey, I talk with cats all the time! And don't call me a fake cat! My cat ears are just an accessory!\n

\nMroooooow mrow!\n" The cat squirmed in his grip, trying to get away.

\nOh, you're hungry? Why don't I buy you some yummy snacks?\n

That quickly got the grey cat to subside. The apparently sentient animal directed his cute, huge eyes at Ves as if pleading for the tasty treats he was promised!

\nHahaha, you're so cute!\n

As Ves bought some expensive snacks that delighted the grey cat and attracted the attention of other felines, he began to subject it to some questioning.

Meanwhile, Gavin, Nitaa, Crindon and the Ingvars looked on with gaping mouths. They weren't entirely sure whether their employer could truly communicate with cats or if he was under some sort of delusion!

\nHow do you like it here?\n

\nMrow!\n

\nYeah. There's cats everywhere. I can understand why you don't feel like you have enough space.\n

\nMrow.\n

"I'm glad to hear you're being well taken care of. Accepting treats from humans every day sounds like a lovely way to spend your days."

"Mrow mrow!"

"Oh? Curious."

"Mrow!"

"I believe you. Thanks for warning me. It's a shame you cats are like that, but I guess you're already comfortable here on Felixia."

Gavin couldn't hold in his curiosity. "What did you find out?"

"Nothing important."

In fact, Ves did learn something very important. Some of the cats here like the grey cat he held right now were designed to be more than pets.

They'd been engineered to act as spies and informers on behalf of House Laterna!

Ves already formed this suspicion beforehand, but that was mainly his paranoia cropping up. To find out from the grey cat that this actually took place alarmed him quite a bit!

To be fair, the grey cat believed that most cats sold on Felixia were perfectly fine. Only a small proportion of cats served as spies, which made it very hard for investigators to find anything fishy about them. The chance of encountering a spy cat was very small, though the grey cat happened to be a part of this secret program!

This also explained why the grey cat was so smart!

"Still, I can't believe you just said that to me in my face." Ves told the cat.

"Aren't you supposed to keep that to yourself?"

"Mrow mrow."

"Hehe, I get your point. You don't have any say in what you are. I'd be pissed too if I was in your place."

"Mroooow!"

"If you could talk to your creators, they probably won't like what you have to say. That's why sentient animals like you aren't granted human vocal chords."

The topic of sentient animals aroused a lot of controversy. The overall consensus in human space was that sentient cats, dogs and other pets were okay, but only if they remained animals.

When geneticists created pets that started to speak or communicate like a human, a lot of existential crises took place!

Right now, the predominant rules mandated by the Big Two firmly forbid uplifting pets into a fully-fledged sentient race.

Who knew what geneticists might cook up in their labs if this rule wasn't in place. Humanity would have engineered their own doom if they came up with a species superior to humans in every aspect!